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A Sham Campaign Reform Bill Passes



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Only in the Connecticut legislature can protecting the status quo be called “reform.”

With the new Connecticut campaign finance law, supporters called it tough and historic, but it’s really an incumbent protection plan. Entrenched lawmakers will be virtually legislators will life.

This is counterfeit reform. It is a squandered opportunity to eliminate the influence of big-money, special interests in state elections. It is a farce perpetrated on the people of Connecticut.

New 120-page legislation, SB 2103, adopted in the middle of the night with great fanfare and chest thumping, essentially adds another layer of state funding on top of money that candidates raise for themselves. It means at least \$17 million a year in state funds will flow as grants to politicians, and probably more like \$50 million.

It all takes effect, not this year, but for 2008 legislative races and for 2010 gubernatorial and other statewide campaigns. If special interest money is so bad, why not ban it now?

Worst of all, it leaves open a back door for legislative leaders to deliver an armored car of special interest money to favored candidates. Legislative leaders will still control political action committees, solicit hundreds of thousands of dollars from special interests and use it to bolster candidates for the state House and Senate.

Yes, candidates themselves will be banned from taking special interest money, but this leadership loophole shows that to be a sham. Money can still flow from special interests to leadership PACs and then to candidates with little public scrutiny. Sometimes, that’s called money laundering.

The PACs can pay for polling, consultants, direct mail, advertising and whatever else the candidates need--on top of the government grants that the candidates will receive. And that will not even count toward the candidate’s spending limit.

In the last election cycle, majority Democratic PACs quietly raised and disbursed a cool \$500,000. Such practices will continue. Democratic legislative leaders have amassed and retained huge amounts of fundraising power for themselves.

Overall, this plan touted as the toughest in the nation, assures one-party control of the state legislature for as far as the eye can see.

I voted for a whole series of amendments to close this leadership PAC loophole, correct major flaws in the legislation and eliminate taxpayer financing of political campaigns.

Regrettably, our efforts to amend the legislation and create true reform fell on deaf ears.

Legislative leaders controlling the debate would hear none of it. Nor would they hear any public input. The legislation was posted on the state website just hours before the final vote, and many legislators saw it only the morning of the session.

All amendments were defeated mostly along party lines. The House ultimately adopted the taxpayer financing legislation by a vote of 82-65.

This money for politicians will come out of the General Fund. In fact, it will probably cost more like \$50 million, including an estimated \$20 million for races for governor and other statewide offices plus expenses for 187 legislative campaigns. And, there will be overhead costs of \$10 million a year to manage the fund.

The new plan will spend what is called abandoned property that has reverted to the state from inactive bank accounts and other financial assets. Proponents call this surplus money. If it is surplus, then why not return it to the taxpayer or used to improve services to the general public—not provide giveaways to politicians?

Once political campaigns receive this public money, there will be little accountability to prevent it from being squandered.

For example, candidates who have no opponent will still receive state grants to their campaigns. For what?

Normally, if unopposed, candidates would raise and spend only minimal sums for a few lawn signs and some campaign flyers. Once received by a campaign, state money will be spent with few controls.

Candidates will have state cash to hire their friends and relatives and not even have to show what work they did for the payments. The campaign staff could all go out to dinner, and call it a campaign expense. You can throw a fundraising party and the candidate does not even have to show up.

With state funds, politicians will be able to buy more radio and TV ads, send out more campaign mail and leave more campaign phone messages on your answering machine.

What a colossal waste.

Instead of this flawed plan, there are infinitely better ways to spend \$17 million to \$50 million a year in state money.

Many people in my district have registered their opinion against using state funds to pay for more political ads and more campaign mail. Instead, we could use the money to build up the chronically underfunded state teacher pension system.

I have heard many people suggest we spend more to fund health care for the neediest of children. What a better use of public money that would be, rather than subsidizing political campaigns.

Many towns and cities are clamoring for more state aid for schools and town services. We would be better to spend this money on state aid to education, saving local taxpayers from raising taxes by that amount.

We really need to prohibit special interest money from politics in every way and as soon as possible. We should abandon plans to heap public money onto political campaigns. We should look to more thoughtful and compassionate ways to make use of any surplus funds.

The legislature must come to its senses before this misguided plan takes effect. The plan needs a complete rewrite, and the sooner the better. The legislature needs to look not to self-protection, but to the protection of the taxpayer.

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